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ABSTRACT

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act, nicknamed the "GI Bill of Rights," influenced a social change in America and its higher education system that could be compared to that caused by the Industrial Revolution. Making college a realistic expectation for many Americans, it also made future generations look upon a college education as an entitlement. The bill was first devised as a means for bolstering an economy that had been shakily emerging from a depression before World War II by a President who was fearful of what returning veterans would do to the economy. The Bill accomplished many social reforms and helped build the world's largest middle class and the world's strongest economy. The Bill's passage may well be considered the most important event of the 20th century. The long-lasting consequence of the GI Bill was that it turned the hodge-podge melting pot that was America, whose ethnic components had composed an overwhelmingly poor working class of people, into country of people more accurately described as college-educated, middle-class, home-owners. It accomplished the goal of many agencies which had worked for years to assimilate the children of European immigrants into the "American Dream" of education and opportunity for all. (JB)

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The GI Bill of Rights Legacy to American Colleges

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Abstract

The GI Bill influenced a social change in America that could be compared to that caused by the Industrial Revolution. Making college a realistic expectation for many Americans, it also made future generations look upon a college education as an entitlement. The Bill was first devised as a means for bolstering an economy that had been shakily emerging from a depression before World War II by a President who was fearful of what unemployed veterans would do to the economy. Accomplishing many social reforms, it helped result in building the world's largest middle class, the world's strongest economy, and its passage may well be considered the most important event of the 20th century.

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act, nicknamed the "GI Bill of Rights," was one of the most important pieces of legislation in American history (Olson, 1974). It not only presented the opportunity for many Americans to attend college who had never dreamed of the possibility, but it also helped to avert potential social and economic disaster resulting from the return of 15 million soldiers without jobs or means of support for themselves and their families. The purpose of this paper is to examine, from a historical perspective, the passage of the GI Bill through Congress, to document the role of two unlikely heroes in the passage of the bill, and to look at how the Bill has impacted both America's educational system and economic development.

The United States in the 1940's

When the United States entered World War II, it was just beginning to recover economically from the Great Depression. The memory of long bread lines and people in the streets begging for work was a vivid recollection. After World War I, Congress and President Woodrow Wilson chose not to assist veterans returning from the war to re-enter the work-force, a problem which exacerbated the economic depression the United States was experiencing. Congressional leaders did not want a repeat of that experience in 1943.

In 1940, when Congress approved the first peacetime conscription act, President Franklin Roosevelt realized that this

bill forced young men to give up hard-to-find jobs as well as educational plans, so he included a provision in this bill guaranteeing re-employment to those who had given up regular jobs for military service. Roosevelt asked his National Resources Planning Board to also begin considering a way to aid veterans during the nation's demobilization which would follow the end of the war. He was only half-hearted in his concern at this time, as he did not want the nation's attention turned to demobilization while there was still a war to win. Roosevelt's cousin, Frederick A. Delano, was head of this agency and it was to his group that he also charged with studying and planning the transportation system of this country, including highways, airways, railroads, rivers, and pipelines. Roosevelt asked this committee to work on the demobilization plan in their spare time and give it no publicity.

The committee Delano appointed called its work the "Post-War Readjustment Manpower Conference" (PMC). The membership of the committee ranged from the Department of Labor, Education Branch, Special Service Division, War Department to Harvard's former Dean of the Graduate School of Education. They took very seriously their charge and knew it had to include not only re-employment, but also training, vocational counseling, and education. Committee members were familiar with World War I provisions which gave a subsistence allowance of $90 to $145 a month for the vocational and professional training of disabled veterans. Although this program gave limited aid to a minority of veterans,

it did establish a precedent for giving rehabilitative aid for a few years with the hope of helping veterans find successful employment (Olson, 1994).

During one of the Committee's meetings "The Wisconsin Educational Bonus Law of 1919" was presented as a guide for providing help to veterans. Implemented in Wisconsin after World War I, it provided each state resident who had served three months in the service prior to 1918, $30 a month for four academic years to attend any nonprofit elementary or high school, technical institution, college or university in the state. The State Board of Education administered the program, but the question of admission and instruction was left up to the school and the veteran. The Committee also looked at Canada's plan for rehabilitation of veterans which included a clothing allowance, unemployment benefits, land settlement, education benefits and business assistance (Olson, 1994).

The Committee's final report was made in June 1943, and included ninety-six proposals ranging from family allowance to twenty-six weeks of unemployment insurance, but the heart of the report dealt with education and training. The plan offered twelve months of schooling at any level, designed to refresh old job skills or to train veterans for new jobs. An additional three years of education would be provided for those who had their education interrupted by military service. Both plans would pay tuition and fees for veterans as well as a modest allowance.

Roosevelt still regarded this work as preliminary and wanted no publicity on its findings until he had to sign into law the amendment to the Selective Service Act lowering the draft age to eighteen. This amendment was very unpopular with the people and Roosevelt knew that in order to muster support, he would have to have a plan for enabling young men to resume their education and training after the war had come to an end. He made public the findings of the PMC during one his "fireside chats." He appointed a new committee incorporating the Army and Navy to develop the President's official recommendation on post-war demobilization plans. The Committee was headed by Brigadier General Frederick H. Osborn, Director of Special Services Division, Army Services Forces (Olson, 1994).

The Osborn Committee devoted full attention to the educational aspect of readjustment. They correlated their studies with the National Resources Planning Board's findings and their final recommendations to the President differed in only a few details from those of the PMC. The Osborn Committee required veterans to have had at least six months service to be eligible for benefits and suggested an allowance of $50 and $75 for married veterans per month. Study must start within six months of discharge and the limit was one year. They suggested those veterans chosen for further study be selected by using a quota system for states.

The Bill in Congress

Roosevelt sent to Congress the Osborn report in July 1943. Congress was reluctant to instigate federal economic planning and had cut off funding to the President's National Resources Planning Board to demonstrate its opposition to this economic planning. In the face of inaction by Congress, the American Legion, which had been co-founded in 1918 by then Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., son of the former president, and then Major Bennet Clark, son of Champ Clark, speaker of the House, started a drive for legislation for veterans. With the war raging and elections only a short time away Roosevelt asked Congress for legislation planning for postwar veteran benefits using the Osborn Committee report as the beginning for a constructive program. From July to October there was no action by Congress and the American Council on Education (ACE) became involved with a plan of their own. All plans suggested were similar being a blend of the "Wisconsin Education Bonus Law of 1919" and the Canadian benefits for veterans (Bennett, 1994).

When Congress finally took up consideration of educational benefits for veterans, the American Legion played a decisive role initiating a campaign to make the bill more comprehensive. They produced a bill of their own after consulting with labor, business, education, and military leaders. In introducing it to the public, they were the first to call it the GI Bill of Rights. The American legion's version of the bill was introduced by John Rankin, Democrat from Mississippi and Chairman of the House

Committee on World War II Veteran's Legislation. The next day Joel Bennett Clark and nine other Senators co-sponsored the bill in the Senate. Clark, a Senator from Missouri and the first National Commander of the American Legion, took the responsibility for directing the bill's passage through the Senate. Clark was strongly conservative and had opposed Roosevelt's New Deal legislation. He was, therefore, an unlikely sponsor for this revolutionary, racially empowering piece of legislation (Olson, 1974).

The Senate Finance Committee through the Subcommittee on Veterans' Legislation conducted hearings on Clark's bill. His bill had largely been written by the Legion but had incorporated some provisions made by the Senate conference committee who was first assigned to study the bill. The American Legion made two fundamental contributions to the bill: lobbying and writing the bill to include a list of diverse benefits as a package deal. The Legion acted more aggressively and with more political leadership than did either Congress or Roosevelt. The Legion's leadership used diplomacy to not offend Roosevelt and to persuade him to support their bill. When the hearings opened, Clark and the Legion met with the President to enlist his aid but he remained aloof, thus allowing the Legion to keep the initiative. The bill resulting from this hearing was jointly sponsored by 81 Senators and was passed unanimously by the Senate in only six days (Olson, 1974).

In the House the most debate was aroused over who would administer the benefits. The original conference committee bill called for the program to be managed by the U. S. Office of Education, while the Legion's bill wanted the administration to be done by the Veterans Administration. The conference committee bill would pay all fees and tuition; while the Legion bill restricted the amount to $300 per year. The conference committee requested $10 per month per dependent child as additional allowance, and six months of service for eligibility. The Legion bill gave no allowance for children and only ninety days of service for eligibility. The conference committee offered a year's study to all veterans and allowed a small percentage to receive three more years of education. The Legion bill offered four years of educational benefits to anyone who had their schooling interrupted (Olson, 1974).

Those who favored the GI Bill of Rights were conservative Democrats and Republicans and ordinary working people. They received much help from the Hearst Newspaper Corporation who allied themselves with those who opposed the New Deal policies. The American Council on Education wanted to limit veterans' admission to colleges accredited by the states. These educators were opposed by Representative John Rankin, who was a well known racist, and ironically his opposition was in the name of black colleges. He claimed the educators' proposal would violate the rights of smaller schools, including some Historically Black institutions (Bennett, 1994).

Rankin's efforts kept the control of the 'purse strings' away from the educators and ensured that black-sponsored and church-sponsored institutions were not excluded. This enabled many Blacks to attend colleges and universities outside of the South and eliminated quotas for Jews and Catholics. The foundation for anti-discrimination legislation was born of this effort. It was an ironic circumstance that an avowed racist made possible the educational opportunities for later day leaders of the civil rights movement (Wilson, 1994).

While Rankin did much to keep control of the bill in veterans' hands, he almost killed the bill when it was ready to pass a House-Senate conference committee. There was a provision call the "52-20 Club" which entitled all 12 million veterans to $20 per week in unemployment compensation for up to a year. Rankin objected to this provision because he was afraid that the $20 per week given to Blacks and Whites equally would undercut the two-tier wage system for Blacks and Whites in the South. Tne dual system had been given legal sanction under the Reconstruction Finance Administration. Representative John Gibson of Georgia had given his proxy vote in the conference committee to Rankin because he was unable to attend the meeting. Rankin refused to cast the deciding vote for passage. The American Legion and the Hearst publishers working in concert managed to find Gibson and get him to Washington to cast his own vote (Bennett, 1994).

Roosevelt in October of 1933 had stated his opposition to giving veterans special benefits. Nineteen moths later he vetoed a veterans' bonus bill, stating that wearing a uniform did not accord a citizen special treatment. His position on the veterans' benefits probably changed because in 1933 and 1934 he could not foresee the magnitude of the war or the problems and the sense of obligation the country would face with the demobilization of millions of veterans. Roosevelt, running for a fourth term as President, recognized veterans as a very powerful voting group and signed the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 willingly (Olson, 1974). He approved it more as an economic stimulus than as veterans' assistance, but it proved to be a popular means to stimulate the economy.

The Success of the Bill

One of the most astonishing things about the GI Bill was how many veterans actually took advantage of it. It had been predicted that 700,000 veterans would be educated over several years while in reality more than 2.2 million veterans, including 64,728 women took advantage of the various GI Bills. Two years before World War II began there were 160,000 U. S. citizens graduated from college each year. The number had risen to 500,000 by 1950. In 1947, 49 percent of all students enrolled in college were veterans (Bennett, 1994). One of the biggest surprises associated with the GI Bill was the academic quality of the students. Originally, there was a fear that colleges would

admit and retain unqualified veterans who could not do college level work. Instead they proved to be academically superior to other students, apparently acquiring discipline and maturity while serving in the armed forces.

Veterans also put a different face to the traditional student. Prior to World War II, the typical student had been a white, unmarried male. After World War II, half of all students were married and 25 percent had children. A typical classroom also included more women, some taking advantage of benefits from the GI Bill (Willenz, 1994). There were significant amounts of money put into Historically Black Colleges to upgrade those facilities which had fallen into disrepair so that they could better accommodate Black veterans who chose to take advantage of the GI Bill; and take advantage they did. Enrollment in Historically Black Colleges more than doubled from 1940 to 1950 (Wilson, 1994).

The GI Bill made great changes in the aims of American higher education. The long-held concept of education for the elite, which had been prevalent since before the Civil War, gave way to universal access to education for everyone after World War II. This meant education not just for middle-income citizens but education for all-income citizens. Half of the GIs taking advantage of the Bill came from families where neither parent had gone to college (Kerr, 1994). College attendance became a new entitlement. Historically, college training concentrated on professions such as law, medicine, and the ministry. After World

War II, there was more emphasis on management, engineering, and technical education. There were many new middle-class occupations created, and the liberal arts component of higher education became less influential (Kerr, 1994).

The consequences for having an educated middle class of citizens led to better paying jobs and more money to spend, thus, a stronger economy. These new jobs made people whose parents had never dreamed of owning their own homes capable of having a home. This development of the "suburbs" helped fuel the longest economic boom in American history (Greenberg, 1994).

The Evolution of the Bill

Since World War II, the GI Bill has been in an evolutionary process. At that time veterans were entitled to a maximum of 48 months of training depending upon the length of their service and schools were paid a maximum of $500 a year for tuition, while single veterans received $50 a month allowance, and married veterans received $75 a month allowance. After the Korean Conflict, the Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act of 1952 was passed for those veterans serving at least ninety days after June 27, 1950. The Veteran's Administration paid the veterans up to $110 a month for school and living expenses for up to 36 months. Of 5.5 million veterans eligible, 2.4 million were trained. Between the Korean Conflict and the Vietnam War, a bill was passed to provide education for those veterans who had served more than 180 days after January 31, 1955. Three million

veterans were eligible for training and 1.4 million took advantage of it (Montgomery, 1994).

The Veterans Educational Assistance Program was enacted for those entering the armed forces on or before January 1, 1977. This bill was passed to stimulate recruitment and retention of skilled and noncommissioned officers. To be eligible, veterans must have served more than 180 days and must have contributed to the plan. The VA matched the soldier's contributions at the rate of $2 for every $1 contributed by the soldier. The soldiers could contribute between $25 and $100 a month, up to a maximum of $2,700. Members had ten years from the date of discharge to take advantage of the benefits which were paid monthly up to 36 months. More than half a million veterans received educational benefits under this bill (Montgomery, 1994).

The Montgomery GI Bill was created for servicemen who began active duty after July 1, 1985. They were allowed to have $100 a month deducted from their payroll for the first twelve months on active duty. The VA then would pay them up to $400 a month for 36 months of college or educational training. The eligibility period was set to expire ten years from the date of the veteran's discharge.

The Selected Reserve GI Bill was passed to allow members of the Reserves or the Army or Air National Guard be eligible for benefits. To qualify, the reservist must extend a tour for six years after June 30, 1985 and remain in good standing as a member of the Reserves, and no money is withdrawn from monthly benefits.

Those eligible receive monthly payments of $190 a month after April 1, 1993. A program for survivors and dependents of disabled veterans or spouses or children of those declared missing in action or prisoners of war was also established. They may receive $404 a month for up to 45 months of education or training (Montgomery, 1994).

Consequences of the Various Bills

The long-lasting consequence of the GI Bill is that it has turned the hodge-podge melting pot that is America, whose ethnic components had composed an overwhelmingly poor working class of people, into a class of people more accurately described by other adjectives: college-educated, middle-class, home-owners (Bennett, 1994). It accomplished the goal of many agencies which had worked for years to assimilate the children of European immigrants into the "American Dream" of education and opportunity for all. There are those today who wish to emulate achievement and national unity brought about by the GI Bill, but as Jack Peltason, president of the University of California, remarked, the effort and opportunity will never again combine to duplicate such growth (Greenberg, 1994).

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